HAER No. DC-14

Rapids Footbridge
Pedestrian trail spanning Rock Creek 0.7 miles
south of Joyce Road, NW
Rock Creek Park
Washington
District of Columbia

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

RAPIDS FOOTBRIDGE

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Location:	Pedestrian trail off Beach Drive 0.7 miles south of Joyce Road spanning Rock Creek, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C. UTM: 18/322910/4313360 Quad: Washington West
Date of Construction:	1934
Designer:	Office of the National Parks, Buildings and Reservations, Department of Interior and Fine Arts Commission
Present Owner:	Rock Creek Park National Capitol Region National Park Service Department of the Interior
Present Use:	Footbridge
Significance:	Rapids Footbridge was one of eight bridges constructed in 1934 with the Fine Arts Commission's approval. It is a concrete arch with stone abutments and wooden railings in keeping with the true and simple form of the park bridges of the 1930s.
Historian:	Marcia M. Miller, 1988

After years of proposals, Rock Creek Park was created by an Act passed by Congress on September 27, 1890. Containing appropriations to purchase 1605.9 acres of land running along Rock Creek from the Maryland border to the Zoological Park to be preserved as a natural park, the act defined the purpose of the park as providing "for the preservation from injury or spoliation of all timber, animals, or curiosities within said park, and their retention in their natural condition as nearly as possible."[1] At the time, the United States government had designated only two other such areas as natural parks.[2] The Commissioners of the District of Columbia and Chief of Engineers of the United States Army jointly controlled the park (although at this time the military exercised more authority). Their duty was to lay out paths and roads for public use. After purchasing the land, however, Congress did not provide for any improvements to the park for the next seven years.

Since Congress did not appropriate money for work within the park, chain gangs (comprised of District prisoners) completed the improvements to paths and roads. In 1898, Congress finally approved funding to create a road running the length of the park. Beach Drive followed the natural course of the path along the creek.[3] This became, and remains today, the main thoroughfare through the park.

The park remained under the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park until 1918. At this time it became part of the National Park system in the District of Columbia with duties transferred to the jurisdiction of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. The officer in charge of the park still reported to the Army Chief of Engineers. In 1925, the new Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital administered the Park after the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds was abolished.[4]

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[1]Mackintosh, Barry. Rock Creek Park An Administrative History. History Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 1985, p. 17.

[2]ibid. Yellowstone and Sequoia National Parks were the first to be designated as such.

[3]Beach Drive is named in honor of Col. Lansing H. Beach, Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, who served as Secretary of the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park and later as the Bridge Commissioner for the District of Columbia. He is responsible for the early improvements to Rock Creek Park.

[4]President Franklin Roosevelt abolished this office, along with the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Commission (established to complete a parkway along the lower end of the creek), in 1933. The Office of National Parks, Buildings, and Reservations in the Department of the Interior (a temporary name for the National Park Service) gained control of the park at this time. Rock Creek Park thus became, and remains today, one of the National Capital Parks.

In 1918, the Olmsted Brothers reported on the park's development and expansion. Approved by the Fine Arts Commission, the Olmsted Report was adopted in 1919, to guide development. Olmsted believed that park structures "should be so designed and located as to fall naturally into place as part and parcel of the scenery, and should never stand out as objects complete in themselves with the surrounding landscape becoming merely a background."[5] James L. Greenleaf who replaced Olmsted as the landscape member of the Fine Arts Commission wrote that structures should be simple forms, easily assimilated by the rustic scenery. They should not be carried to the extreme in trying to blend with the scenery.[6]

With these ideas in mind, new roads, paths and structures were constructed in the park during the next several decades. As the park was now the most noteworthy in the District and used not only for motorists but for pedestrians and horseback riders; footbridges and bridle trail bridges became a necessity.[7]

In 1933, flooding washed away eight footbridges. These were replaced in 1934 by more substantial bridges. Many of these earlier bridges had been built of timber to meet the rustic surroundings.[8] As this was neither economically feasible nor suggested in the Olmsted Report, the new bridges would be constructed of concrete with stone-faced abutments and wooden railings providing the rustic features.

The Office of National Parks, Buildings and Reservations of the Interior Department designed the bridge and the plans were approved by the Fine Arts Commission. Charles Moore was Chairman at the time. C. Marshall Finnan was superintendent of the National Capital Parks. The bridge cost $3,570 which was appropriated to the District of Columbia through a grant from the Public Works Administration.[9]

The three span footbridge is 110 feet long and five foot four inches from curb to curb. The arch, with a significantly long radius, is formed of a long concrete span. A concrete deck rests on two stone-faced piers and stone-

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[5]Mackintosh, p. 40.

[6]ibid., p. 42.

[7]Latimer, Louise Payson. Your Washington and Mine. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924, p. 225.

[8]Scheetz, Frank B. "Bridges," in Planning and Building the City of Washington. ed., Frederick Haynes Newell. Washington, D.C.: Ransdell Inc., 1932.

[9]Spratt, Zack. "Rock Creek's Bridges," Columbia Historical Society Records v. 53-56, 1955-1956, p. 109.

faced abutments. The wing walls are stone faced. Visible board markings give the concrete a pleasing texture.[10] The railing is four feet in height and constructed of wood. The date "1934" is cast into each side of the structure's deck at opposite ends of the bridge.

Although not the most picturesque of the footbridges built in the park at this time, Rapids Footbridge is representative of park bridges built during the 1930s.[11] It is one of many built during the same period from similar designs. Numerous other bridges were built of concrete with stone-faced abutments. This bridge's design followed the ideas put forth in both the Olmsted Brother's Report of 1918 and Greenleaf's later notes on the report.

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[10]"Park Office is Complimented for Rock Creek Bridge Designs," The Washington Star, Nov. 26, 1933, B-1.

[11]All of the 1934 trail bridges across Rock Creek are of the same general style. Each design varies to fit the individual site, as to length, elevation, number of spans, etc. The railing design also varies from bridge to bridge, most are wood, but two are concrete, and one is steel.

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